Maru Hiratzka

The “Six Inseparables.”Maru is on the far right, back row.

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I had never been out on my own, never.”

The story of Maru Hiratzka’s life during the war is really a love story. After separate family decisions took her and her high school sweetheart, Jordan Hiratzka, in opposite directions (she to Texas and Jordan to Utah), they never stopped writing to each other. And when Maru nearly left the states to go to Japan, Jordan’s father arranged for her to come to Utah instead to wait for Jordan, who was serving in the Military Intelligence Service. Eventually they married, had two children, and a life that Maru speaks of with fond memories. “Jordan was fun-loving, everyone liked him.”

It seems he took after his father, Paul, whom Maru continues to regard with the utmost respect. “I just admired him. He was such a humble man.” Paul Hiratzka was the kind of person who thought ahead, made smart decisions and took initiative to make their lives in America a little easier on everyone. The spelling of Hiratzka hints at this: originally spelled Hiratsuka, Paul changed it to “z” to make it easier for people outside the Japanese community to pronounce.

Maru and Jordan would spend their entire lives together until Jordan’s tragic passing in a car accident in 2001. “He always said, ‘I hope I don’t linger, I hope I never have to go through being sick.’ He certainly didn’t,” says Maru. “He had so much to give to life.”

Let’s start with the story of how you and your husband met.

We grew up together in Santa Maria, California. He was half a year ahead of me in high school. He graduated summer of ’41 and I graduated December ’41. Just in time, I was the last class to graduate before Pearl Harbor.

Were you two a couple in high school?

Yeah, well, we did a group thing. And so we were always, always together. And later we just kind of paired off after high school; went to his senior prom, then we went to camp right after that.

So you went to the same camp?

First we went to an assembly center in Tulare. Then they shipped us to Gila, Arizona. Then from Gila we separated. His father was in Montana with all the men. Jordan was in Gila with his mother and sister. When his dad got released from Montana, he went to Ogden, Utah because his son, Tom, was there. So he wrote and got Jordan, and his mother and sister released from Gila. So they were sent to Ogden, too. They went in March of '43.

And in April, my dad was in Santa Fe, New Mexico; he was separated from us too. The men sent in a petition to say, "We want to be with our families." So Papa wrote us in Gila to say that they're starting a camp in Crystal City, Texas so we'll be together again. So in April of '43 my mother, my two brothers and I and my aunt who lived with us, we were put on a train to Texas. That was a long, long trip. Crystal City camp was altogether different.

What do you remember about that camp?

I remember that camp well because we were there two and a half years. Crystal City was different because there were many people from Hawai'i who came and many of them were Buddhist priests or Japanese teachers because they were the so-called dangerous ones. Then we, the mainlanders, were the next group that came from all the other camps. So we met people from everywhere in Crystal City. Then later the Peruvians came. Of course there less than ten Italians and two or three hundred Germans. But they were the "pro-Nazis."

So the Germans were actual Nazi sympathizers in the camps?

They called them the American Bund leaders. They were very friendly because we were all in the same camp, of course they had the German

section, the Japanese section. But we could walk around everywhere. And they [the Germans] made the best bread, they took care of the bakery. My dad worked in the laundry. Our parents were put to work in the grocery store, the laundry, the hospital, maintenance. But the Germans would come strolling in our area with their dogs, and they were very friendly.

Why was your father separated by the FBI?

The Hiratkza family. Jordan's mother and father are both far left and right, respectively, and Jordan is next to his mother.

Well, Santa Maria Valley is agriculture country. We aren't farmers but most of the people were farmers and they contributed money to the Japanese government. And once you do that, you're on a blacklist. The FBI had records. And Jordan's father especially, he was a community leader, of Nihonjin-kai and things like that. And he used to work with people at the consulates and embassy in San Francisco and L.A. He spoke English perfectly, so he knew the local police officers. They called him by name, Paul. So he was very prominent, in other words.

So December 7th, that night, Jordan and his sister Amy were home because [their] mom and dad went to L.A. to attend a big dinner at a Chinese restaurant with dignitaries from the area. It was a big Japanese kind of a thing. So they were down there. Jordan said at about 9 o'clock at night, the bell rang at the front door and someone knocked at the back. Jordan says he went to the front door and Amy went to the back. They said, "We're looking for Paul Hiratzka." He said the front door was a local police who knew Paul Hiratzka and the whole family and the back door was the FBI. And they came in and wanted Paul. They told them he's in Los Angeles, attending a dinner. So they said, "You two will have to come to the police station with us." So Amy and Jordan were taken with them to the Santa Maria police

station. Amy was so upset.

How old was she?

Amy had graduated high school in 1940. So they were both taken, she was crying. Jordan said they couldn't do anything, they just had to sit there at the police station and wait. They came at 9:00, and at 4:00 in the morning they heard over the loudspeaker, "We got your man."

Speaking about his father?

Yeah. So Jordan said after that they drove them home because they got his father. So Amy and Jordan came home. But the next day, Jordan came to high school. He says, "I didn't get any sleep hardly, but why stay home?" His dad was taken from L.A. in his hotel. His mom had to wait for other friends who were at the dinner who came from that same area so she could get a ride home.

Do you remember if she was upset?

Oh very much, she was very upset. They were sleeping when they came to the hotel to wake them.

That's awful. I wonder what they had heard about Pearl Harbor, and if they knew what happened.

I wish I had Paul's diary. But he said that they were driving with the Imamuras, and he saw newspaper extras once he got to LA which said "Japs Bomb Pearl Harbor." And he said it must've been dema [rumors, false]. So they went to the dinner.

Where is his diary now?

When he went to the police station after the hotel, he asked for a pen and tablet, and then he started writing and he wrote it in English. Jordan's father for an Issei man was educated. In those days I don't think many Issei men were educated. So he started writing his diary on December 7th.

Do you think he started one not only for a record but because he was afraid something was going to happen to him?

I think so, I think he just wanted to write everything that was happening. And he continued to keep a diary until he died. I just admired my father-in-law. He was such a humble man, he was educated but he treated everybody fairly. Everybody liked him. He was good.

Very well-respected.

Yes and he was a good Christian. After I got married to the family, I used to see him reading the Bible and studying. But his sense of humor, oh my goodness.

You were very lucky.

I know. Funny thing is Jordan's mother was a very proud lady, proud Japanese lady. Kept things just so. Jordan's father was very easy-going and loved everybody. And sometimes, she would be mad about something he would come over and say, 'The Tsarina is on the path right now.' [*laughs*] He would call her "The Tsarina." Who ever knew that word at that time? I didn't, when I was so young. He'd make funny comments like that to us. He was a great guy.

What did he do after camp?

He went back to Ogden, Utah. And he decided to rent a large, three-story building and he said, "I'm going to start a place where people can come after camp." Kind of like a boarding house. He said, "Mama, I want you to do the cooking." She is a very proud lady, I can't imagine her cooking for all kinds of people. But she did, she did. And she was a

good cook. So after people were released from camp — single men, couples — they came and rented a place in their apartment and stayed.

So word got around that he had a place for people.

Yes. They stayed for a number of years and joined the church there. And of course he had that apartment but he said I've got to earn some money. So he went to work at the local Union train station as a janitor. Another funny thing, he had poor eyesight. He had to take a test with his eyes. He said he studied the chart. [*laughs*] He was a great man.

How did they come back to California?

Well, I was in Texas and Jordan went to Ogden. I went to Crystal City and joined my family. We were separated for two and a half years and in the meantime Jordan was in Japan with the MIS. Went to the Philippines and they closed up those bars. They stayed there very shortly in Manila then they were sent to Japan. The war ended when he was on the ship going to the Philippines in 1945.

That's when my dad got orders saying that people in Crystal City had a choice: Do you want to go back to where you came from or do you want to

go to Japan? The Peruvians weren't able to go back at that time. A lot of people went to the to L.A. area. But my dad said no, we have nothing to go back to in Santa Maria. We rented a house, we don't own property, and we says my mother is all alone in Japan running the farm, so I've got to go back to Japan. My mother was not very happy about going back to Japan but she and my two brothers went with my dad.

But before that in Crystal City, when the decision was made: What about Maru? In the meantime Jordan was in Japan, and we'd been corresponding all the time and he said he would receive my letters that said 'Prisoner of War' on the stationary and they'd be cut up, censored. But we kept up and he wrote his dad and said, "Maru said she's going back to Japan with her dad. I don't want her to go back." So his dad wrote my dad and said I think Jordan wants to marry Maru so, when you get your orders to go to Japan please send Maru to us in Ogden and then she can wait for Jordan to come back. So that's what we did in December, it was very cold. I had to say goodbye to my family. They picked me up in the car at our place and I said goodbye to my brothers, my mother and aunt. My aunt was like a second mother. I had to say goodbye to them and Papa went with me to the gate, and there we said goodbye. Then they put me on a bus to San Antonio, all by myself. I had just turned 19.

How did you feel about leaving them?

I was afraid, I was protected. I was very naive, I had never been out on my own, never. But there was another girl who left camp, too. And Mama had packed a little snack for us so we found a park near the San Antonio River walk park. Then at the train station, do we use the Black or white bathroom? That was the first time for us to have that. So I went to the white side. What if I get chased out? But nobody bothered us. So once we got on the train I happened to sit next to a young lady from Texas and we were talking about everything. And there were a lot of GIs on the train, and they were bothersome. Good thing she was there, she would tell them off.

They were bothering you two?

They were bothering all the women, the GIs. Then I said I was very sympathetic about the Black people and she says, "Well, you won't have me rubbing elbows with an 'n.'" That's what she said. So I said oh, okay. But she was good to me and fine. So it took me three days to get to Ogden.

Maru and Jordan on their wedding day in Ogden, Utah

And you had wanted to marry Jordan, of course.

Yeah, since high school we knew each other, we did a lot of things. We liked each other. It's comforting when you have a friend that you've done things with and you like things with. And have things in common.

Were you conflicted or upset about your family? Did you feel like you should go with them?

No, my dad said, "No, you go with Jordan." You've known him for all these years. And they knew the parents. But I missed out on my college because I wanted to be with my parents as long as possible. So I said no [to college], so for at least for two years while I was with my parents.

So they knew for a while that they were going back to Japan. Where in Japan?

Okayama. Next to Hiroshima.

What happened when the bomb was dropped, and how did he know his mother was okay?

They didn't. But somehow he said that she's still running the farm by herself, without really knowing what her condition was.

What happened once they were there? How did you find out about them?

After they sent me to Ogden a week before they were to go, they were on a train to Seattle to get on a ship to go to Japan. They landed in a place called Uraga near Tokyo Bay. And my brother said that the women got off the ship regularly but the men, they had to climb a rope ladder to get off the ship.

I wonder why.

I don't know why. My brother didn't explain it to me because he was young, too.

What happened after they arrived?

Papa said when they got there, Grandma thought she was seeing ghosts. She did not receive the telegram [that the family was arriving]. So here are my father and two brothers and mother, coming all at once.

Jordan began his Berkeley Boy Scout troop when he was 26 and led it for 37 years. He is in the top row, fifth from right.

Was she happy or more just surprised?

I think she was more shocked. I didn't hear the detail of her reaction. She's very typical Japanese mother-in-law that made it hard for my mother. My mother said she was trying to help her. Being on a farm, at least you can grow vegetables and have something to eat. City people were having a hard time. But my mother said they were peeling satoimo, that slimy potato. That's hard to peel because it gets very slimy. My mother was peeling those and Grandma would come over and say you're taking too much! Anyway, Japanese mother-in-laws are hard on their young daughter-in-laws. That's a known thing I think. It was hard for her. When the time came later that she could correspond, she says I'm so glad you didn't come with us.

How long were they in Japan?

They just stayed, until they died.

Wow. Did you ever go visit?

I went a number of times. but the first time I went was 22 years later because you know I got married, I had children and Jordan went to school. So about the time we could go it was because of Jordan's Boy Scout troop. He started a troop exchange with a Japanese group near Osaka. I got on the plane with them, took my two children and flew to Japan. While he did his Scouting I went to visit my parents with my children.

How was that visit for you?

I almost didn't recognize my mother. I saw this lady that I thought was my mother and I went to hug her, and it was my mother's sister.

Maru and her brother, Sid Okazaki

Do you feel a loss for what happened during the war?

No, not really. [If this didn't happen] we would've been in the same little community but now we're spread out. We've grown. So it's been good, too, in some way that this happened. Of course nobody likes war. But still some good has to come out of something.

And what about your parents? Do you feel their lives were interrupted by this?

Well, I don't know. But the Japanese are very strong. You know the yamato-damashii? "Japan is strong." We can't be wrong, and all this.

Yes, save face. Pride is everything.

Pride, yes. I know even in camp when it was declared Japan lost the war, some of these men were very adamant about Japan, they just couldn't believe it. They went back to Japan thinking that they did not lose the war.

But the Japanese, they're just so strong. And creative, I just admire the way they do things. They just improve things, they don't stop. They just amaze me what they can do.

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